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ABSTRACT

The blockbuilding, painting, and oral expressions of young children provide evidence of a natural tendency to symbolize experience and to use the symbolic elements of expressiveness, creativeness, and living form. Up to the present time, educators have not fully grasped the fact that the need to symbolize is at the base of all education. They should recognize that the real task of schooling is to extend the "expressed need" of the child's inner world to other modes of knowing. In designing language arts activities to include the total brain process, teachers may find it helpful to consider seven criteria developed from the works of Susanne Langer and Marshall McLuhan. (A rationale for conducting language arts activities involving both brain hemispheres is provided, criteria for designing such holistic activities are listed, and specific activities for each criterion are suggested.) (RH)

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BLOCK CITIES AND MAGICAL ROBOTS:

"NEW KEYS" TO THE BASICS

by

Peggy Emerson, Ed.D. and Cindy Leigh, Ed.D.

This article, based on the work of Susanne Langer, philosopher; Bob Samples and Asa Hilliard, educators; and Robert Ornstein, brain researcher, emphasizes the needs of children for many forms of expression. The authors encourage classroom teachers and school administrators to reevaluate the curriculum on the basis of children's expressive needs. They have formulated seven criteria for designing "wholistic" language arts activities and suggest specific activities for each criterion. The article contains approximately 2000 words.

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"Why can't our children express themselves?"

This question seems to arise when teachers, parents, and administrators get together. Parents cry out for basic education, while legislators and state department of education personnel bundle together "competencies" to ensure literacy.

Turning to the subjects of the question--the children--we observe young children building complicated block cities, organizing patterns of color at the easel, and telling involved stories of dinosaur-eating monsters and magical robots. What clearer evidence could we find that children have a natural tendency to symbolize their experiences--to re-create them in expressive forms?

Susanne Langer, a prominent philosopher, has constructed her entire theory of the nature of man around this felt need to express reality symbolically.[1] Langer implies that man has an innate urgency to continue the creative process in all of human life, to express "the

nature of human feeling."[2] She states that feelings are a part of experience and should be expressed in a variety of concrete forms. The arts, she contends, are the results of man's need to articulate human feelings in forms. Each offers a special style of creation, but all share the common elements of the symbolizing process.[3] Graphic art, for example, is created "virtual space" (spaces that did not exist before but are now brought into actuality).[4] Music, Langer says, is created "virtual time" (rhythms that cause time to be heard as never before).[5] Dance is created for appearance by putting movements into visualized time.[6] All of these expressive forms present the experience in symbols that are very near the intake experience itself. Langer states that a different experience is possible from participating in each art form. But more important are the common elements in each art area--the elements of the symbolizing process: expressiveness, creativeness, and living form.[7]

In the blockbuilding, painting, and oral expressions of young children, we see evidence of the child's natural tendency to symbolize his experience and evidence that the child is able to use the symbolic elements suggested above. What we, as educators, have not fully grasped is the fact that this need to symbolize is <u>at the base of all education</u>. When we criticize the expressive

abilities of children, we are really criticizing their failure to express themselves in logical adult forms, the only forms that we consider literate. Our real task is to extend the "expressed need" of the child's inner world to other realms--to other modes of knowing.

Current research supports this emphasis on various modes of knowing. Robert Ornstein and other brain researchers have observed that the two hemispheres of the brain must be developed before all of the various opportunities for problem-solving are available.[8] Their research has shown that in most individuals the right brain area deals with spatial and intuitive expression, while the left brain handles problems logically. In The Wholeschool Book,[9] Bob Samples has discussed the role of education in developing the abilities of both cerebral hemispheres. Samples recognizes man's need for continual growth in motor-sensory areas and refutes the notion often supported by Piaget's work that man is "moving away from the sensory-motor" and toward "logical thinking." Samples' views coincide with Langer's in that both maintain that man has a need to grow through expression of himself in different modes. The arts, Langer points out, offer children a means for "total" expression.

Harry S. Broudy has made an excellent case for the relationship of the arts to basic education, emphasizing

the role of aesthetic education in developing images, words, and thoughts in the human mind.[10] In another article he further contended that a broad spectrum of image-building experiences gives the adult fertile ground for intellectual mind process.[11] The implication dominating both of these articles is that the content of a discipline is not so important as the stimulation of associations, visual images, and interdisciplinary conceptualizations provoked by such broad-based experiences.

Asa Hillard, researcher and Dean of Education, San Francisco State University, in an interpretation of the work of Rosalie Cohen, suggests that children who have been "culturized" in various environmental situations have also developed very different "styles" of learning.[12] The Black child is generally able to express himself much more easily through visual forms than through oral language, and many of these children also have styles of learning that are sensory-related. Hilliard and Samples both criticize our schools for being geared to "linear" or "logical" thinking and for actually discouraging intuitive and visual-spatial problem-solving. In other words, children are required to change their styles of learning and of knowing to a system that may be unrelated to their usual methods of thinking. Many children from "analytical" cultural backgrounds never develop the ability to think or

express in other less-logical forms. They may also be limited in their ability to think analogically and to apply their knowledge to new situations because they lack the rich store of visual images and the playful intuitive attitude necessary for such thinking.

Although studies justifying the place of the arts in basic education are impressive, they are, as Broudy emphasized, not enough to justify the money and time spent on a good arts program. Rockefeller's Panel on the Arts[13] and Project Impact[14] reported children achieve impressive scores in reading when arts constitute a large part of the school curriculum. But perhaps "arts for arts' sake" are vital to complete the total cognitive process and the wholeness of man's intellectual potential.

John Gardner, in his book Morale, suggests that man is a seeker whose search leads him into three areas of experience: the search for knowledge (science); the search for moral order (philosophy); and the search for oneness with the universe (religion).[15] If it is through these experiences that man finds meaning, then educators should offer students experiences in these areas to inspire them to search. The learning process should generate excitement and joy to reinforce success in these three areas and to stimulate continued seeking. Failure at the early stages of educational exploration may prevent the child from going

beyond his very early feelings to deeper experiences. The arts of language may be primary means for experiencing, in the deepest sense, all three of Gardner's suggested areas.

In designing language arts activities to include the total brain process, teachers may find it helpful to consider the following seven criteria developed from the works of Susanne Langer and Marshall McLuhan, a contemporary media analyst. Every language activity will not meet all of these criteria, but during each school week children should have an opportunity to participate in activities designed to emphasize each of the criteria. Illustrative examples are included.

Criteria for Designing Wholistic Language Arts Activities

Criterion 1. Language arts activities should include in sumultaneous experience as many of the senses as possible: smell, sight, taste, touch, and hearing.

Examples: *Let children use movement, sound, drama, and poetry to express the experience of a March storm.

*Have an ethnic foods tasting party and let each child write about a new taste experience.

*Ask children to "get to know a tree" using as many of their senses as they can. Then let

them tell the class about their trees using many different forms: movement, language, sound, visual art, etc.

Criterion 2. Language arts activities should give opportunity for presentational experience through building an awareness of shape, space, color, time, and movement.

Examples: *Ask each child to dance around a chair and show as many ways as possible to move in the limited space, while always keeping one body part on the chair.

*Have a special time every morning for children to work with visual media: clay, paint, collage materials, chalk, blocks, etc.

*Let the children make an 8-mm movie such as "The Shapes Around Us." Have them develop a sound-track for the visual form.

Criterion 3. Language arts activities should give opportunity for discursive experience through building an awareness of sequence, logic, and communication.

Examples: *Have children explain a field trip in logical form by telling what happened in the sequence of time. This may be done through photographs arranged in order, through collected materials placed in a classification system and described in a notebook, or through sharing with the class in an oral presentation.

*Let children publish a monthly school newsletter, emphasizing to them the need for logical and correct written form in communicating their ideas.

*Have a typewriter available in the "Writing Corner."

Criterion 4. Language arts activities should be inclusive of metaphorical experience which emphasizes the transfer of meaning from one form of expression to another form of expression.

Examples: *Play a record or music box and let children react through painting, movement, words, etc.

*Read a story to a group of children and ask them to reenact the story through mime.

*Let children look at paintings by famous artists and ask them to use musical instruments to describe the feeling or mood of each.

Criterion 5. Language arts activities should include the "mythical" element which allows children to take on imaginary roles without the limits of the real world.

Examples: *Make available in one area of the room various kinds of "dress-up" paraphenalia such as masks, hats, shoes, scarves, dresses, jackets, wigs, large pieces of cloth, etc., along with space and props to encourage informal dramatic play.

*Have children make various types of puppets to use in retelling favorite stories.

*Let children debate an imaginary issue such as "The Pros and Cons of Owning a Pet If You Live on the Moon."

Criterion 6. Language arts activities should motivate completion of a symbolic form or an idea.

Examples: *Ask children to extend their own feelings about activities into selected forms.

*Tell children the beginning of a story and let them write the ending.

*Show children enlarged photographs of object parts (such as a cross section of a stalk of celery) and ask them to visualize the objects from which each came. Then ask them to photograph other objects that would make interesting enlargements.

Criterion 7. Language arts activities should allow for problem-solving through reflection, choice of form, and repetition.

Examples: *After a class "fiesta," ask the children to think about their experience and express their reactions by means of painting, music, poetry, etc.

*Set aside a certain time each day for children to dictate experience stories to the teacher, to class "reporters," or into tape recorders.

*Arrange the class schedule flexibly enough to allow children time for individual thinking, reading, or working on special projects.

These seven criteria make it apparent that many of the most complete language arts activities occur spontaneously and are initiated by the children. Building block cities and creating stories about magical robots are activities which involve most of the seven criteria.

The fact is clear that we limit children's growth in basics when we narrow the curriculum to "intake skills," those emphasizing reading and listening for most of every day during a child's early school life. When teachers afford children no opportunities for problem-solving or expressing an experience through the extended forms of language--dance, art, film-making, dramatics, poetic expression, and creative writing--then they limit "the search." When they ignore the expressive function of language, teachers are not using the nature of man to its full advantage. Instead, they may be closing off opportunities for the child to know himself and the world in ways that are as valuable as logical thinking. If man is truly unique as a being, one way to help him continue the

development of his potential is to guarantee him the basic foundation needed to search and discover, the opportunities and the tools necessary for him to symbolize his experiences through many forms. The language arts teacher can encourage each child architect to use all of the processes available to him in moving beyond the block cities of today and toward the visions of tomorrow.

Footnotes

[1]Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (New York: The New American Library, 1942).

[2]Susanne Langer, Problems of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 8.

[3]Ibid., pp. 13-58.

[4]Ibid., p. 29.

[5]Ibid., pp. 34-43.

[6]Ibid., pp. 5-7.

[7]Ibid., pp. 13-58.

[8]Robert Ornstein, The Psychology of Consciousness (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977).

[9]Bob Samples, Cheryl Charles, and Dick Barnhart, The Wholeschool Book (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1977).

[10]Harry Broudy, "Arts Education: Necessary or Just Nice?" Phi Delta Kappan, January, 1979, pp. 347-350.

[11]Harry Broudy, "The Brightest and the Best," Phi Delta Kappan, May, 1979, pp. 640-644.

[12]Asa Hilliard, "Analytical and Relational Cognitive Styles." Distributed by Janice E. Hale, Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education, Clark College, Atlanta, Georgia, at the 1977 Conference of the Southern Association on Children Under Six, Houston, Texas. The research was compiled by Asa Hilliard from the doctoral dissertation of Rosalie A. Cohen, "Primary Group Structure, Conceptual Styles and School Achievement" (University of Pittsburgh, 1967).

[13]The Arts, Education and Americans Panel, David Rockefeller, Jr. (Chairman), Coming to Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts for American Education (New York: McGraw Hill, 1977).

[14]Roger M. Williams, "Why Children Should Draw," Saturday Review, September 3, 1977, pp. 11-15.

[15]John Gardner, Morale (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).